

2:106 Any message which, We annul or consign to oblivion We replace with a better or a similar ones.⁸⁷ Dost thou not know that God has the power to will anything?

⁸⁷ The principle laid down in this passage – relating to the supersession of the Biblical dispensation by that of the Qur’ān – has given rise to an erroneous interpretation by many Muslim theologians. The word *āyah* (“message”) occurring in this context is also used to denote a “verse” of the Qur’ān (because every one of these verses contains a message). Taking this restricted meaning of the term *āyah*, some scholars conclude from the above passage that certain verses of the Qur’ān have been “abrogated” by God’s command before the revelation of the Qur’ān was completed. Apart from the fancifulness of this assertion – which calls to mind the image of a human author correcting, on second thought, the proofs of his manuscript – deleting one passage and replacing it with another – there does not exist a single reliable Tradition to the effect that the Prophet ever declared a verse of the Qur’ān to have been “abrogated”. At the root of the so-called “doctrine of abrogation” may lie the inability of some of the early commentators to reconcile one Qur’ānic passage with another: a difficulty which was overcome by declaring that one of the verses in question had been “abrogated”. This arbitrary procedure explains also why there is no unanimity whatsoever among the upholders of the “doctrine of abrogation” as to which, and how many, Qur’ān-verses have been affected by it; and, furthermore, as to whether this alleged abrogation implies a total elimination of the verse in question from the context of the Qur’ān, or only a cancellation of the specific ordinance or statement contained in it. In short, the “doctrine of abrogation” has no basis whatever in historical fact, and must be rejected. On the other hand, the apparent difficulty in interpreting the above Qur’ānic passage disappears immediately if the term *āyah* is understood, correctly, as “message”, and if we read this verse in conjunction with the preceding one, which states that the Jews and the Christians refuse to accept any revelation which might supersede that of the Bible: for, if read in this way, the abrogation relates to the earlier divine messages and not to any part of the Qur’ān itself.

16:101 And now that We replace one message by another¹²⁵ – since God is fully aware of what He bestows from on high, step by step¹²⁶ – they [who deny the truth] are wont to say, “Thou but inventest it!” Nay, but most of them do not understand it!¹²⁷

¹²⁵ I.e., by substituting the message of the Qur’ān for the earlier dispensations – and not, as some Muslim scholars maintain, “abrogating” one Qur’ānic verse and replacing it by another. (Regarding the untenable “doctrine of abrogation”, in the latter sense, see 2:106 and the corresponding note 87; see also note 35 on 41:42.)

(41:42) no falsehood can ever attain to it openly, and neither in a stealthy manner,³⁵ [since it is] bestowed from on high by One who is truly wise, ever to be praised.

³⁵ Lit., “neither from between its hands, nor from behind it”, i.e., it cannot be openly changed by means of additions or omissions (Rāzī), and neither surreptitiously, by hostile or deliberately confusing interpretations. The above is one of the Qur’ānic passages on which the great commentator Abū Muslim al-Iṣfahānī (as quoted by Rāzī) bases his absolute rejection of the theory of “abrogation” (for which see note 87 on 2:106). Since the “abrogation” of any Qur’ān-verse would have amounted to its *ibṭāl* – that is, to an open or implied declaration that it was henceforth to be regarded as null and void – the verse in question would have to be considered “false” (*bāṭil*) in the context of the Qur’ān as it is before us: and this, as Abū Muslim points out, would clearly contradict the above statement that “no falsehood (*bāṭil*) can ever attain to it”.

Source

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